

Good Manners In A Nutshell

Patrick McGeown gets a medal

When I was called into the Australian Embassy on Sathorn Road to get my medal I didn't expect a huge reception with dignitaries from the four corners of the world. Nor did I expect a guard and band, or a banquet with the finest crustacean the sea has to offer. And lucky I didn't expect it — because I didn't get it.

And don't be misled into thinking that my medal was for bravery. One might think that I singled-handedly saved an Australian warship from sinking, or fought off intruders trying to overthrow the ship. But those situations only happen in dreams or Steven Seagal movies. No, my medal was for nothing very special — just a medal for my service with the Australian Navy in Papua New Guinea in 1974.

But you don't get a medal every day. And one has to be prepared. I was to be in the residence of the Australian Ambassador. I was to be his guest. My mind had a million thoughts. What to do in this situation, in that situation? What if he asks me this or that, how, which, why, when, where? I had to show class. I couldn't let the Ambassador see that I was a mere plebeian. But how to do it? How could I pull this off? — I needed help.

Dust had accumulated on my 1938 version of *Good Manners In A Nutshell*, and this told me that certain areas of my life were in need of attention. I studied this and other books for a week. Of course there were things I studied that I didn't really need to know — like the proper procedure for a bridesmaid in mourning at a wedding. And how to address a letter to the Pope. But the chapter on official functions was the one I really needed.

No medal ceremony is worth its salt unless it is preserved for posterity. So I called on the services of my good friend and photographer, Mr Paul Knights. Mr Paul also had the transport — a clapped-out trail bike.

On the day in question and prior to the presentation, Mr Paul and I decided to have a snack. I have to admit I like spaghetti, and we dined at my favourite Italian restaurant. At this point I should mention *Good Manners In A Nutshell* doesn't indicate in any way that I couldn't eat spaghetti prior to a medal presentation; I have since taken it upon myself to write to the author about this serious omission. Anyway, halfway through the meal the inevitable happened. That great long

spaghetti snake lashed about the plate, twisted and turned, and attacked me full on. My shirt was a disgrace. Leaving the restaurant I observed that the food stains on my nice white shirt couldn't be passed off as anything other than food stains on a nice white shirt. It was an immediate trip to Robinsons Department Store to buy a new shirt. Luckily my etiquette book told me to allow plenty of time to get to a medal presentation ceremony — so we had lots of time.

When you run out of petrol on a major road it is annoying. But that annoyance is further exacerbated when you can't find a petrol sta-



His Excellency, the Ambassador of Australia, Cavan Hague presents the reader of *Good Manners In A Nutshell* with a medal.

tion. My friend, Mr Paul, pushed the bike while I walked on the footpath; I pretended we weren't together. The Embassy was only a short five kilometres away on Sathorn Road, and time was against us. We did find a place to re-fuel — but fuel wasn't the problem; it was the spark plug. A million thoughts go through your mind when you are running late. I imagined the Ambassador peeking out the window of the Australian Embassy, looking down on to Sathorn Road and asking: "Where is McGeown?" I don't like to keep anyone waiting, and my poor head was a can of worms. Should I dump Mr Paul and get a taxi bike? No, I couldn't do that; he was the photographer. I needed this photo for my mum. Anxiety set in. But I had to grin and wait. *Jai yen yen*. It didn't take as much time as I thought.

About one hundred metres before the entrance to the Australian Embassy I asked my chauffeur-cum-photographer, Mr Paul, to let me off the bike. Arriving on time is one thing, but arriving as a pillion passenger on a clapped-out motorcycle is another. Thankfully, the books

told me to use the utmost discretion in formal situations. I did. I once again pretended I wasn't associated with Mr Paul until we reached the door of the Ambassador's residence.

Trained staff are a godsend. Opening the door, the maid greeted us with a pleasant hello and a small cough. *Good Manners In A Nutshell* mentions that a small cough can mean there is a problem that needs to be rectified immediately. I looked Mr Paul up and down and got him to turn around.

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He appeared in order. I observed myself also. Yes, everything was zipped and buttoned. The shoes were clean. My hair was in place. I turned around and asked Mr Paul to give me the once over. He insisted there was no problem with my dressing; so it must be him. I made him turn again and again and concluded there was nothing seriously wrong. The maid stared at us doing pirouettes at the front door. She coughed again. It became obvious she had a cold.

We were led into the lounge room of the Ambassador's residence. Little did they realise they had two 'hicks' to entertain. I pretended I

knew something about art and looked at the paintings. Mr Paul pretended he knew something about plants and smelled the flowers. The Australian Ambassador, His Excellency Mr Cavan Hogue, arrived escorted by his lovely wife Mira. Also, some Embassy people and a team of maids.

Thank goodness I had also read Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends And Influence People*; so I was prepared. Dale Carnegie mentions you should talk in terms of the other person's interests. I did. I talked about me. After I bored the poor Ambassador to death about my Navy days he presented me with my medal. After the presentation I thought he would bundle us out the door quick smart, but no. He had prepared some lovely snacks and drinks, and we sat around and talked about me for an hour or so.

Good Manners In A Nutshell mentions it isn't polite to take savouries and put them in your pocket for later. So a lot of my time was spent watching Mr Paul; he hadn't read the book and I was worried he might disgrace me. We gorged ourselves like there was no tomorrow: the food was delicious.

The Ambassador and his wife bade us farewell at the door. It wasn't a moving farewell with tears and hugs but more a simple good-bye and see you again. The door closed. The Ambassador and his wife returned to their life. I returned to mine. Mr Paul returned to his simple life. And *Good Manners In A Nutshell* returned to the bookshelf. **I**

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